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MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

October 25, 1978

PARTICIPANTS: Rear Admiral Pedro Santa Maria, Commander, Argentine Coast Guard  
 Rabbi Marshal Meyer, Member, Executive Board of the Permanent Assembly for Human Rights  
 F. Allen Harris, Political Officer, American Embassy, Buenos Aires

PLACE : The American Club

SUBJECTS : Human Rights and Argentine Politics

During a three-hour luncheon reciprocating earlier hospitality, we discussed the following subjects:

Command and Control of Anti-Subversive Operations

Admiral Santa Maria stated that he was personally concerned with the inability to bring anti-subversive operational units under strict control. He stressed that this view was shared by the other local commanders who, like himself were responsible for security operations in the greater Buenos Aires area. This subject came up regularly at the Commanders' bi-weekly working luncheons which are attended by the Colonel (name not mentioned) responsible for security operations for the entire First Corps and the number zone commanders and one other Naval officer and himself. During a recent lunch, the Colonel, who replaced Colonel Rouldes a short time ago as head of the First Corps security operations, reported that he had proposed a new command and control system over anti-subversive activities within the entire First Corps area to the Corps Commander General Suarez Mason. The proposal would have given the Corps the clout (palo) necessary to strictly control all operations. The Colonel reported that the initiative was turned down.

Santa Maria ruefully commented that tighter central control was badly needed. In response to my inquiry about the amount of operational direction which anti-subversive units receive, Santa Maria indicated that it was practically nil. He then enumerated the following problems within the anti-subversive program: operations run for private gain, ideological zealots, and poorly trained personnel who lack the sophistication to

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make key judgments between "activists and ideologues". The Admiral emphasized that unless stricter control measures were instituted from above, it would take a very long time to bring the security force operations into line. He stated that the security forces had recently received instructions to run all operations in a legal manner. (Note: He did not make any distinction with respect to terrorist targets, but later the conversation referred to clandestine operations directed against a Montonero military column. See below.)

The Admiral and Rabbi Meyer swapped tales regarding police shakedowns. The Rabbi won the contest by telling of a Jewish businessman who called on the Chief of the Federal Police General Ojeda to provide him information to identify the policeman who had been responsible for his kidnapping for ransom. During the meeting one of Ojeda's aides entered the room, stood well behind the General and pulled out his pistol while pointing at the businessman. The businessman got the point and left the country for Israel the following day. Santa Maria shook his head at the story and stated that one of the top priorities was to remove General Ojeda from the Federal police job.

The Admiral blamed much of the security forces' lawlessness on police elements and pointed to their notorious history of shaking down businesses. The Admiral mentioned that the police chief's job for precinct No. 1 in Buenos Aires at one time had been sold for \$100,000 paid in advance with no guarantee of tenure. He added that things had not changed, but only gotten more subtle.

#### Information on Disappearance Cases

Rabbi Meyer made a special plea regarding the human suffering of the many families who call on him who do not know whether their children are dead or alive. The Admiral said he understood the problem. He noted that he personally had made a proposal within the Navy that the names of those who had been killed in confrontations with the Armed Forces be given to their families either by representatives of the government or through an intermediary body such as the Red Cross. He noted that Foreign Minister Admiral Montes had recently come out favoring such a course of action.

In response to my question about the likelihood of this proposal being adopted, the Admiral stated frankly there was little chance at present as a number of Army elements were

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strongly opposed to providing information on these cases. Rabbi Meyer said that it was imperative to provide this information prior to the March 1979 visit of the Inter-American Human Rights Commission. The Admiral listened, but made no response.

#### Timerman Case

Rabbi Meyer made a strong plea for Timerman's release or expulsion from Argentina. He noted that Timerman's three children were all now living in Israel and that a military investigation and the Supreme Court had found him innocent. The Admiral said that the Navy wished to be helpful on this case, but if the Navy proposed Timerman's release to the Junta, it would not be found acceptable by the Army. He suggested that the American and Israeli Ambassadors try to have either Viola or Videla propose Timerman's release to the Junta, in which case the Navy would support it and it would be adopted.

#### Lambruschini Bombing

In reply to my comment that many people thought that the Lambruschini bombing had been perpetrated by right wing Army elements, the Admiral responded that a successful operation had been run against the Montonero group which staged the fatal bombing. He said that the break had been the capture of two Montoneros who under interrogation revealed the names of their companions. This led to the capture of a young woman who identified the Montonero's "rat hole" (ratonera). When the Army, which handled the operation, raided, they were ambushed and a firefight broke out in which three or four Montoneros were killed. Unfortunately two of those killed were among the persons who the security forces most wanted to interrogate. It appeared that the Lambruschini bombing had been planned for at least two years but had been repeatedly delayed because of logistic problems or fears by the group that their plans had been discovered. The Montoneros planned to place the explosives with the neighbors' apartment inhabited, the fact that the apartment was empty was just a piece of luck. In total, Santa Maria said there were 17 Montoneros captured and three or four killed in the September operation.

#### The Armed Forces Political Proposals

Santa Maria commented that the Air Force's political proposal which had been "leaked" last week by CLARIN was totally unrealistic and reflected the influence which Professor

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Genta had on the development of the political views of this entire generation of Air Force officers. He explained that Professor Genta, a Facist intellectual, who after having been eased out of a teaching position at the University of Buenos Aires became the professor of politics at the Air Force's two Command Colleges. Genta's political philosophy, which is mirrored in the Air Force document, was based on a total distrust of the fundamentals of democracy and the 1853 Constitution. The Admiral stressed that the Air Force plan is not realistic and will have little impact on the final Armed Forces military proposals.

The Admiral described the Navy's political proposal in terms of three phases. The first phase calls for the democratization of the political parties. Under the Navy proposal, electoral judges would enroll the national polity in the political party of their choice. (Note: The Admiral did not discuss the development of a new "Armed Forces" political movement.) The entire enrolled parties membership would then elect leadership at local, provincial and national levels on the basis of one man, one vote. In contrast, the present "puntero" (ward healer) system allows the local boss to go to the district political meetings with 200 "fichas" (cards) in his pocket and HE decides who the district, provincial and national leadership will be on the basis of the votes he controls. This undemocratic system has led to the stagnation and abuses of the present Argentine party system.

The second phase would be to conduct elections at local, provincial and national levels for the respective local councils, state and national legislatures.

The third phase would be for these bodies to elect the mayors, provincial governors and the national president. These officials would run the country for one four-year electoral period. After this, elections would be based on the constitutional provisions in the 1853 Constitution. The Admiral added that the Navy estimated that the present military government had between three to five years to put this plan into effect and elect a new government.

#### Videla's Attitude Towards the United States

Several times during the long luncheon, Santa Maria emphasized that President Videla has clearly indicated that he wants to improve relations with the United States. The Admiral noted that Videla's desire was expressed in terms of the United States and not in terms of improving Argentina's overall

image in the world. He suggested that the Embassy and Rabbi Meyer take advantage of the President's attitude to work on key issues impeding relations between the United States and Argentina, such as the Timerman case.

### Clandestine Prisoners

I mentioned the continuing reports of a large number of clandestine prisoners being held by the military in Argentina. Rabbi Meyer reported his information on a clandestine underground detention facility near Tandil holding over 180 persons. The Admiral acknowledged that a number of persons who were either cooperating with government forces in running the security program or who had changed sides were reported as "disappeareds." He said that he had no information regarding the total number, but he believed it was small. He said that he personally had seen only about a hundred of such persons in these categories around Buenos Aires, but noted that he could not speak for other services nor for the country at large.

### The Fading Videla Presidency

The Admiral acknowledged that Videla's presidency was losing support within the Armed Services. However, he reacted very strongly to suggestions that the Junta had arrogated power from the presidency. In a long and detailed historical explanation, Santa Maria explained that it was agreed that the policy making authority from the first day of the negotiations leading to the current military government was to reside in the Junta. He mentioned that the Air Force and the Navy wanted to call the government's chief administrator, "the Prime Minister" to emphasize his subsidiary role. The Army rejected this nomenclature stating that there was no mention of a "Prime Minister" in the Constitution and it would lead to confusion. The Admiral said that the complaints coming from the Pink House regarding the President's loss of power are noises from people who have not been able to execute the administrative functions they are charged with. He stated that the President had all the administrative powers granted to the President in the 1853 Constitution. He regretted that because of the period when the President was also a Junta member, there had been a mixing of the administrative and policy roles. For example, the entire Junta got bogged down on questions of ambassadorial and ministerial appointments which should have been done by the President.

In reply to my elicitation that certain members of the Navy were privately predicting that the Videla presidency would only last another six to eight months and that many political observers were talking about political futures for Massera, Suarez Mason or Martinez de Hoz as possible replacements for Videla, the Admiral had several interesting comments. First, he said that Massera, himself, saw no possibility of the Army's accepting a Naval officer to head a military government. The only way that Massera saw himself becoming president would be through some form of electoral process. Secondly, he noted that a replacement president from the extreme right did not appear likely as hard-core rightists were a relatively small number within the Armed Forces. Lastly, he said that if a replacement was needed for Videla, the Junta would most likely turn to a retired Army General who had demonstrated administrative capabilities, such as the governor of Chubut or Cordoba Provinces.

#### Trip to South Korea

Admiral Santa Maria stated that he had just returned from a three week trip to Korea representing the Argentine Navy at the South Korean Armed Forces Day Celebrations. He was very impressed with the economic progress the South Koreans had made especially given the fact that they had no natural resources and a high defense budget. He said the Koreans stressed two bilateral points: the availability of protein supply from Argentina and the possibility of immigration.

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